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The Fourth Church Pulpit

OH, THE PLACES YOU WILL GO!

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Scripture: Mark 1:16-20

Moses is dead. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness the people of Israel have arrived at a river. On the other side they can see their destination, the Promised Land.

Joshua ~~1:1-11~~ 1, 1-2, 5

You may not identify with much in the Bible. You may not ever have seen a burning bush, and the voice of God may never have spoken directly to you, and you may never have seen anyone walk on water. And you may have concluded that whatever it is that the Bible is about, it is about things that happen to other people.

However . . . there is not a one of us who cannot identify with those people gathered on the banks of the Jordan River, all their belongings, all their traditions, all their history behind them, peering through morning mist into the future, the Promised Land. How are they feeling that morning, forty years of nomadic wandering about to come to an end . . . four decades of a routine they had long ago accommodated about to confront a radically new future? My guess is that they are anxious, scared. They feel like going back, and if that is not possible, they are seriously considering going no further. They are talking about stopping right there — "on the verge of Jordan" — as the old hymn puts it. Which is to say, they are feeling a lot like you and I feel much of the time.

Who can't identify with them? Personal change, movement, is a life reality. One of five of us makes an actual move every year and I'm not certain whether the people who came up with that statistic even count what goes on in urban neighborhoods like this one where apartment hunting and moving is a common social ritual, bordering on a passion. Most of us do know the reality, the anxiety, sometimes the fear, which characterizes a move.

And if we're not moving locations, we're moving from one job to the next, or trying to, or planning to, or hoping and wishing that we could . . . and that move, too, is the occasion of no little fear and trembling.

Some of us are thinking of making a move relationally, planning to move from autonomy to intimacy, from independence to interdependence. Some of us are contemplating total commitment, marriage. Ministers know why brides sometimes weep and grooms faint. It's not only love and nervousness. This is a frightening move. Who knows these days how it will turn out? Or to put it more correctly, how can you tell if the person you will become in ten years will still love the person she or he is in the process of becoming. And some may be thinking about a move from dependency in an unhealthy relationship or an addiction to drugs or alcohol, and the future without it feels very frightening.

And some of us know the anxiety and fear which result from one of the biggest life moves of all . . . aging and retirement. It is a defining moment when out of the blue you receive notification that you are eligible for membership in A.A.R.P. and for the first time perhaps you find yourself thinking the unthinkable, namely that there is a day ahead when you need to find something to do other than the job which has been your life for all these years. That change comes after about the same number of years Israel wandered in the wilderness before ending up on the banks of the Jordan, peering through the morning mist into the promised land and shivering, not only because it was chilly that day. Who doesn't know about that experience?

My proposal this morning is that the life of faithfulness is a journey, a moving from place to place that this experience — so very common in life itself — becomes religious, becomes an experience of God's presence, God's leading, God's grace for us, far more frequently than burning bushes, voices out of the blue or walking on water.

The story of faith in the Bible is not an account of people sitting down and figuring out what they believe. It is a story of people moving on a journey, a pilgrimage. It begins when an elderly couple hear God's promise and God's call and in their old age do something very unlikely - pick up and move. And the story continues when the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, urged, cajoled, pushed and prodded by Moses, finally pack up and move out of Egypt and travel through the desert for forty years. And later, that same people will be summoned by the prophet Isaiah: to break out of their oppressive routine in Babylonian captivity.

> "Do not remember the forever things" God says to the people.
>
> "Do not consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it. I will make a way in the desert. . . ."

The strong implication being that the new thing, the way in the desert, is actually a highway, upon which God's people are to walk, to move.

And, of course, there is the chapter of the story to which we have our closest affinity which begins when a man walks by a group of fishermen mending their nets and says:

> "Come, follow me."

It often seems that moving, traveling, getting up and going somewhere new is what faithfulness means in the Bible. And it is always an experience of exhilaration and energy ultimately, but first it is an experience of anxiety and fear and reluctance.

In fact sometimes it seems that the opposite of faith in the Bible is not sin or unbelief, but the refusal to move.

The title of this sermon comes from a distinguished man of letters; a commentator on modern life, the late Dr. Seuss. Dr. Seuss wrote wonderful children's books which somehow also managed to be wonderfully adult books. One of the tragedies of not having little children in your life is that you no longer have a socially acceptable reason for reading *The Cat in the Hat, Green Eggs & Ham, Yertle the Turtle,* out loud. *Oh, the Places You'll Go* is a book for graduates or for anyone about to move into a new future. I found in it, a word for those people peering through the mist of the river into the Promised Land, and a ~~word to this congregation of~~ God's people as it ~~prepares to launch into a new future~~, and a personal word for each of us.

> "Congratulations!
> Today is your day.
> You're off to Great Places!
> You're off and away!
> You have brains in your head
> You have feet in your shoes
> You can steer yourself
> any direction you choose.
> You're on your own.
> And you know what you know.
> And you are the guy who'll decide where to go."

There are some risks. Dr. Seuss warns that the going will not always be smooth or easy.

"I'm sorry to say so
but sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you.

"You will come to a place where
the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted.
But mostly they're dark.
A place you could sprain
both your elbow and chin.
Do you dare stay out?
Do you dare go in?"

Sometimes it seems that the opposite of faith in the Bible is not sin or heresy but the refusal to get up and move. The young man who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life was a very good man. Jesus loved him. He went away sorry because he could not conceive of doing something new.

Dr. Seuss put it this way:

"You can get so confused
that you'll start in to race
toward a most useless place —
The Waiting Place
for people just waiting
for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come,
or the rain to go,
or the phone to ring
or the snow to snow
or waiting for their hair to grow."

Alvin Toffler's important book, *Future Shock,* taught us that in a time of rapid social change, when everything is moving and nothing is pinned down you and I are inclined to create for ourselves what Toffler called "personal security zones," areas of life that are stable, unchanging, often nostalgically, based on the past. And ~~one of the most popular "personal stability zones," I sub~~mit, is religion.

Regardless of the fact that faith in the Bible is described as a journey, a moving from here to there, we want stability. "Give me that old time religion." "If it was good enough for Moses, it's good enough for me." We don't want to follow Jesus into a new future. We want him to come to us and walk in a garden where the dew is on the roses and he can tell us that we are his and he is ours alone.

Martin Marty, in a now famous quip, once said that the last words of the institutional church will be,

"We never did it that way before."

The story is told of a little girl watching her mother — or her father — prepare to bake a ham. At the end of the process, just before placing the ham in the baking pan, she cut a small section off each end.

> "Why do you do that, Mommy?" the little girl asked. "Why did you cut the ends of the ham?"

Her mother answered:

> "That's how my mother did it. Let's ask her."

So they called on the grandmother and asked her why she cut the ends off the ham and she responded,

> "Why, I'm not sure I know. That's how my mother did it."

So, off they went to see great-grandmother, and they asked her why she cut the ends off the ham before baking it. And the old woman, in her nineties, thought for a long time and finally said,

> "I remember now. I cut the ends off the ham because my baking pan was too small."

Sometimes the Christian church does that sort of thing. Lyle Schaller, one of the very best thinkers about how churches live in this culture, asked recently, "What is the number one issue facing Christian organizations on the North American continent? Dwindling numbers? Money? Social justice? Leadership? Television? Sexuality?" After three decades of study, he wrote,

> "This observer places a one sentence issue at the top of that list — the need to initiate and implement planned change from within." [*Strategies for Change*, p. 10]

And so we have set out, at this time, to move into a new future, an ambitious undertaking. We plan to rebuild this church from the inside out. And in order to do it we plan to ask one another to think new thoughts about faith and responsibility and personal commitment. We are in the process of asking one another, in many instances, to do something radically new — to make significant sacrifices in order to move our church into the future. And, at this very moment, we are continuing to try, to the best of our ability, to respond faithfully to the call of Jesus Christ to go into the world in his name, in his love. So, as we travel and build, we will find a way to tutor our children and help our neighbors and teach our young and care for our elderly. And this very afternoon we dedicate a new thing — The Center for Whole Life at Cabrini-Green — a new venture in mission with our neighbors.

William Willimon, chaplain at Duke University, wrote a book, *What's Right With the Church*, in which he said,

> "Our Lord calls us not to form a cozy little club of the religiously inclined, but to help him turn the world on its head."

One day, at the beginning of the story, he was walking beside the Sea of Galilee. He saw two men casting their net. Their names were Simon and Andrew. He said to them, "Follow me." And that is what they did . . . laid down their net and followed. He saw two more, James and John, mending their gear, with their father sitting in their fishing boat. He said, "Follow me." And that is what they did.

We wish there were more to it than that. We wish we knew about them and their lives and what made them so ready to move, so willing to accept the risks and uncertainties and insecurities implied in walking away from job and family and tradition, into an unknown future. We wish we knew that they knew him and had reason for confidence in him, knew where he was leading them. But we don't. The account startles me every time I read it with its leanness: **invitation — command — response.** And I have concluded that this is what the Bible wants to say and that this is a word from the Lord to me ~~and to the congregation~~ — to all of us and each of us.

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian who has thought and written about what it means to live your life faithfully ~~in this world~~ teaches that the church's efforts to convince people to volunteer time, to get involved in programs, to give more money, are nothing but transparent, self-promotional gimmicks — "beating the drum for God and money" he calls them — unless they are grounded in, and are an expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To live your life faithfully begins with a summons to follow, and continues in a life which is moving always more deeply into the life of the world, a journey that can end up at the cross; a pilgrimage characterized by living for others, by loving the world for Christ's sake, by giving one's resources, skills, passion, love and life itself — to the cause of Christ.

It's not easy. It's not easy to do that, particularly in this time and place. *The Culture of Disbelief* is the book everybody is reading, ~~from President Clinton on down~~. The author, Yale Professor, Stephen Carter, contends that we are not an atheistic culture so much as an indifferent one when it comes to religion. We can tolerate a bit of religion. In fact a little religion is good — a necessary political asset, part of the personal appeal package — happy wife, smiling children of the aspiring political candidate. So long as it is not taken too seriously. William Buckley said if you mention God once at a New York dinner party you are met with stony silence. Mention God twice and you don't get invited to any more dinner parties.

Stephen Carter says American culture regards acceptable religion as a kind of personal hobby like stamp collecting or model trains.

And so for you and me the call can be a radical summons to be different, to act differently, to march to a different drummer, to travel in a new and different direction, to live for others, to give life away . . . to put on the line my energy, my time, my resources . . . in love for my neighbors, the children, the future . . . my Lord.

Jesus called his disciples to get up from what they were doing and to follow him. He promised them new life. He said they would actually find their lives when they got up from what they were doing and moved into a new future, characterized by giving life away.

That is our secret. It ~~is the only stewardship worth your attention~~. The promise is adventure, surprise, challenge, and through it all — life.

"Out there things can happen
and frequently do
to people as brainy
and footsy as you." Dr. Seuss advises.

"And when things start to happen,
don't worry. Don't stew.
Just go right along.
You'll start happening too."

Oh, the places you will go! Like Dr. Seuss, W. H. Auden thought about the journey and ~~at the end of his "Christmas Oratorio,"~~ wrote what I think are among the most hauntingly beautiful lines . . .

"He is the way
Follow Him through the Land of
Unlikeness
You will see rare beasts,
and have unique adventures.

"He is the truth.
Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety,
You will come to a great city
that has expected your return for years.
"He is the life.
Love Him in the world of the flesh.
And at your marriage all its occasions
shall dance with joy."

Jesus said,

"Come . . . Follow me . . ."

Amen.